DON'T GET CAUGHT LOOKING UP

May 27, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
John 17:1-11
Acts of the Apostles 1:6-14

"...why do you stand looking into heaven?"
Acts 1:11a (RSV)

This is the day the Lord hath made. It is also the day before Memorial Day, the unofficial beginning of summer, a popular weekend on which to be married, to launch a boat, light up the grill. It is the day you can count on irises to bloom, I was taught. For those whose lives are given symmetry by the rhythm of seasonal sport, these are important, if occasionally ambiguous, days. It is also Ascension Day in the peculiar calendar of Christianity. More accurately, Thursday was Ascension Day - forty days after Easter. But my guess is that it went unnoticed and uncelebrated in your home as it did in mine.

For a variety of reasons we don't pay much attention to the Ascension. In fact, it is one of the phrases in the Apostles' Creed that modern Presbyterians hurry over as quickly as possible...

> "the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God...;"

Do we believe that? He ascended into heaven... Or put a little more gently, to what reality is this ancient belief pointing? Does it have anything to do with us, with the life we are in the process of living right here on earth, very much this side of heaven?

The problems begin the physical practicalities...

William Willimon, preacher to the University at Duke, recounts in a little book of essays an Ascension Day disaster at an Episcopalian Seminary... the Episcopalians and Romans and some Lutherans - unlike we less imaginative Calvinists - do pay attention to and sometimes celebrate Ascension.

In any event, the seminary community in "robes and regalia" gathered in the chapel.

> "It was quite an event with deans, faculty and seminarians all suitably attired. The service ended amidst clouds of incense, the assembly emerged from the chapel singing a great Ascension hymn. Unknown to the worshipers, an enterprising student had taken one of those tacky, near life-size Christmas creche figures - the hollow, plastic, painted kind - and stuffed it with some sort of rocket device. As the procession of proper clergy marched into the courtyard, the student lit the fuse, sending the statue soaring up out of the shrubbery, sailing through a cloud of acrid smoke and sparks, buzzing the rapidly dissolving procession, finally doing a nose-dive into the roof of a nearby dormitory. There, the Ascension rocket sputtered and died. The dean was not impressed." [On A Wild and Windy Mountain, p. 100]

My only Ascension Day experience was second hand, also a disaster but not quite as dramatic. A friend was an assistant pastor of a large urban church, in charge of youth work. He had devised what he thought was a creative celebration for his Senior High Fellowship to observe Ascension Day. It was the 60s, and "creative celebration" meant guitars, holding hands and doing something with balloons. Balloons are a natural for the Ascension. So there was a large bunch of bright-colored, helium-filled balloons which were to be distributed to each youngster who would then take it outside and release and watch it ascend. However, the young person holding the balloons in the worship service let them go and they floated to the highest peak of the sanctuary ceiling, over the chancel. And they didn't come down. That was Sunday. The next weekend there was to be a very large wedding, involving a very prominent family. At the Friday night rehearsal the father of the bride was not amused, in fact was very angry, at what the bunch of balloons did to the miniature Garden of Eden he had paid a florist to create in the church. So the frantic senior minister called my friend with a crisp ultimatum. "You put them up there. You get them down - before morning." Though it was never verified, he told me and other privileged insiders that he and his wife spent late Friday night shooting the balloons down with his son's BB gun.

The problem is one of literalism. If you read the Bible as history or physics or biology or anthropology, you have a lot of intellectual problems. In fact, your major problem will be something the people who wrote the Bible did not have - namely, trying to reconcile a 2,000-year-old scientific world view with what we know to be true.

The Biblical account is really quite simple. Luke, writing several decades after the fact, closes his account of the life of Jesus with the Ascension of the Risen Christ on Easter night. Now, Luke wrote another book. It's called The Acts of the Apostles and he begins with the Ascension, this time forty days after Easter. Forty days: the time Jesus spent in the wilderness: the time Moses spent on Mt. Sinai negotiating with God: a theologically significant period of time.

The mistake, which actually leads away from the importance of this event, is to regard Luke as a newspaper reporter. He's not. He's not even an historian. He's an artist, trying to put into words and ideas the most important thing that ever happened. And it makes no more sense to hold his images up to objective scrutiny and ask - "Did it really happen like that?" than it does to go down to the Art Institute and dismiss Monet because haystacks really don't look like that.

In any event, Luke closes the story on the life and ministry of Jesus by having him talking with his friends and then going away - "up" - Luke says.

The real problem with a literalistic interpretation is that it has Jesus going away from the world and his friends and the uncertain future they were about to begin. I'm convinced Luke meant the very opposite.

What the Ascension story means to convey, in fact, is very different from the spatial removal of the body and person of Jesus. It is, theologically, an attempt to make two brave and very important affirmations: two ideas so huge, so cosmic, that they are larger than any words we can find to describe them.

The first idea is that Jesus of Nazareth was God's son: that this carpenter, teacher, healer, who was crucified by the Roman authorities, was none other than God's own son: that his humble life was filled with God's holiness and peace and compassion: that when Jesus of Nazareth died, a victim of the world's harshness and cynicism, God participated, experienced death. And that on Easter morning, that holy Jesus did not stay dead, but rose again, and so did the holy love and compassion and peace which he incarnated. Ascended to heaven... gathers up all of that. It is God's stamp of approval on the life of Jesus.

The second idea is that this life was not a one-time event, but the beginning of something new in human history. This same Jesus sits down with God to rule the world. To "go up" - does not mean to go away but to assume a position of authority. God "arises" in Psalm 68 to ride on the clouds. Kings go up, in the Psalter, to assume the throne, to take charge. Those early disciples believed that in Jesus Christ God was doing a new thing within the life of the world; creating another world, an alternative world to the one in which Caesar crucifies Christ and innocent people suffer. The weak and poor are always the victims and death is supreme. They actually believed that in Jesus Christ God was building a Kingdom in the world, from the bottom up, a Kingdom that exists within the life of the world - as yeast exists in bread, as seeds germinate and push new green growth up through dry ground. "Ascended into heaven" means Jesus Christ reigns.

The intriguing part of the text, however, is a vignette which is often missed. The disciples are standing around dumbfounded, looking up. Two men come along and say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?" I.e., "Don't stand around with your head in the clouds. There's work to do in Jerusalem." I think that's the essence of the matter. I can't think of a more pertinent, relevant word to religion, religious

people, or the church... than: "Get your head out of the clouds. There's work to do on earth." In light of these huge spirit and mind stretching affirmations the church makes about Jesus, the temptation is to focus our gaze on the sky, keep our heads in the clouds. The action, we need to be reminded, is down here. Religion is about God, and the world about.

The first, and in many ways most important, theological shock I ever experienced was on the first day of class in a college religion course. The professor, a man I came to regard as one of my saints - scholarly, thoroughly human, vigorous, blunt - began by saying, "Most religion is a matter of pie-in-the-sky, by and by." The professor's point was the elemental one: namely that religion seems to be about the hereafter, the realm of the spirit, the "other world." But Jesus taught about a Kingdom coming right into the life of this world. Traditionally religion spends its energy with questions such as "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin," while the realities of life in the world are far more mundane like... how are we going to survive on this planet in the future.

The ancient text could not be more relevant. The future of religion, and I believe the life of the world, depends on our ability to hear and respond to the angelic reproach: "Why are you standing around looking up, when there is so much work to do here on earth?"

In his monumental work, Does God Exist, Hans Kung argues that atheism has been supported and encouraged, not so much by its academic proponents as by religion that is divorced from the human struggle for freedom. Seventy years of official state hostility to religion in the Soviet Union was based on the absolute detachment of religion and the church from human suffering under the Czars. Lenin wrote, "Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a kind of spiritual intoxicant in which the desire for a decent human existence is drowned," and his assessment, tragically, has been true at times.

What Lenin didn't know, because the official state church had quite forgotten it, is that the religion of Jesus can never be wrenched away from the daily, human realities of life in this world. Or, put another way, a religion that deals only with the transcendent - the spiritual, the other worldly - is not the religion of Jesus.

One of the important new religion books is The Political Meaning of Christianity by Glenn Tinder, a professor at the University of Massachusetts. Tinder prepared an excerpt which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, "Can We Be Good Without God?"

He observed that we are so used to thinking about spirituality as withdrawal from the world, that it is hard to think of it as political or social. We assume that spiritual religion is personal and private. But that assumption diminishes God. "The notion that we can be related to God and not the world, that we can practice a spirituality that is not political is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

Tinder's book has been widely read, reviewed and debated and is already out of print. The reason is that it proposes a radically different kind of religion from that which is succeeding so vigorously in our time,

the religion of escapism and withdrawal. There is a revival of other worldly spirituality going on, and churches and religious groups that are smart enough to capitalize on it are experiencing dramatic growth. The last chapter in Megatrends 2000 is about this phenomenon. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene observe:

> "When people are buffeted about by change, the need for spiritual belief intensifies. Most seek assurance in one of two ways: either through inner-directed 'trust the feeling inside' movements or through outer-directed 'this is the way it is'authoritarian religion. Both are flourishing today." [p. 272]

We need, it would seem, the angel's reproach. Because standing around, looking up into heaven has become a very popular religious activity.

The late Karl Barth wrote that he rediscovered the doctrine of the Ascension as Nazism was spreading over the face of Europe. When life begins to fall apart, when darkness begins to hem us in, when we are forced to contend with principalities and powers capable of overwhelming us, it helps to be able to affirm that there is a God; a moral universe; that love and justice and goodness are still the firm foundation upon which human history rests. Furthermore, Jesus, our brother and friend, the one who lived our life, experienced our humanness - yearned, hoped, dreamed, laughed, loved and wept - with us and for us, this same Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. That is more than we can explain or describe. Words begin to break under the weight of this central belief, that no matter what else is happening to us or around us, Jesus Christ is sitting at the right of God. It is what we have to offer, Willimon says, to the mother of a starving child or a terminally ill patient. It is the word of encouragement we dare to say to one another and to hold tightly in our heart of hearts when a dear one dies, or when we flunk out of school, or the boss calls us in and tells us the career we have invested everything in pursuing is over, or the dearest love of your life walks out, or the test comes back positive and you face surgery and months of painful therapy. It is the essence of what every clergy tries to say at the funeral; and what each gropes for words to express to a grieving friend. Jesus Christ ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God. It is what we say to the young man dying of a brain tumor and the parents who just lost a baby. When life crumbles in... "Jesus Christ has ascended." At a level deep within us it is the word we cling to and which gives us, in spite of what is happening around us or to us, hope and strength and encouragement - to go on living. When the lights start going out, says Willimon, it helps to know who's in charge.

That's the strongest thing we Christians believe. "He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right of God." But, "why are you standing there looking up into heaven," the angel asked. Equally strong and important and life-giving and hope-producing is the idea that in Jesus Christ, God is creating a new world from the bottom up, that God's Kingdom, established with the justice and peace and gentleness and kindness of Jesus, is here in

our midst, sometimes, not always but sometimes, visibly. That's the only way they could explain the experience of new life that was there in the fellowship, the company of believers. They faced incredible opposition. The early Christians lost the toleration Rome extended to Judaism and therefore confronted the prospect of the full weight of Roman power dedicated to their eradication. And yet they survived and thrived and grew strong; and they believed it was because in Jesus Christ God had planted the seeds of an alternative Kingdom.

So, too, as blacks and whites scream obscenities at one another in the streets of Brooklyn, other black people and white people gather in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and light candles and speak a quiet but eloquent word about reconciliation and healing, another order of things in which black people and white people are all God's children, and therefore, brother and sisters.

That sort of thing happens all over the world. It turns out that for forty years in Eastern Europe, the faith was alive and vigorous, thriving in fact, although invisible to us. And, it turns out, that after all the missionaries were expelled and religion opposed and banned, an indigenous church remained and thrived in change. And so it happens here, not always dramatically, but insistently, and with the power of God's love in it.

On Thursday evening, as it happens three nights a week, the school bus pulled up to the curb outside our Delaware door, across the street from limousine traffic at the Four Seasons. As I was walking by, out of our basement came a crowd of people: "Young Urban Professionals," mostly white, fashionable raincoats, white running and walking shoes, briefcases, arm-in-arm with children, mostly minority children, getting on the bus, headed for home in the projects after Tutoring. The tutors were walking them to the bus... there was a lot of fooling around, laughing, some hugs and affectionate good-byes, a few high-fives... a small piece of the Kingdom of God on Delaware, a bit of heaven.

That's what we mean when we stand up and say:

> "He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God."

"Men of Galilee" - men and women of Chicago - "why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you... will come in the same way you saw him go...." Indeed... Amen.

\+ + +

God eternal, God who shares our life: help us, we pray, to know you in your majesty and also your intimacy; to see you, riding on the clouds and also in the face of our neighbors; reigning from the heavenly throne and in city streets. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.